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How the U.N. spends your tax bucks

LOFTON UNLEASHED

By John Lofton

To tell the truth, when I dropped by the National Academy of Sciences and National Academy of Engineers symposium on "nuclear winter," I did not expect to see my tax dollars at work in the form of a Soviet employee of the United Nations.

The reason I went to this meeting — which was held to discuss the possible effects of nuclear war on the world's climate — was to hear one of the speakers, astronomer Carl Sagan, say something stupid, which he did.

In a question-and-answer period, when I asked Mr. Sagan to characterize the Soviet military threat to the United States, and specifically, to say what he thinks should be done about the Red Army's brutal invasion of Afghanistan, he ignored the first question but did respond to the second question. Comparing the Soviet atrocities in Afghanistan to what the United States did in Vietnam, Mr. Sagan said he is "appalled" by both of these actions.

When I asked if he was seriously likening our actions in Vietnam — which were taken to *prevent* the communization of Indochina — to the Soviet's actions in Afghanistan, the purpose of which is to communize that country, Mr. Sagan refused to reply. And several people in the audience hissed my question.

But, back to my tax dollars (and yours) which I saw at work. Or, to put it more accurately, not at work. Or at least not at work in any conventional sense of the word.

During one of the breaks between sessions, when I attempted to question one of the symposium attendees — a Mr. Timour Dmitrichev of the Office of the U.N. Secretariat, the Disarmament Affairs Department — he smiled, motioned towards the lobby, and said: "Let's have some tea." Fine. But when I tried to interview him, to get his views on the subject of nuclear war and nuclear winter, he clammed up explaining that "staff rules" prohibited him from talking to the press.

Mr. Dmitrichev, who said he is from the Soviet Union, did say, however, that he was at this symposium because the U.N. General Assembly has requested a report on nuclear war. But no, he said, he was writing no report on the symposium. He said he was attending it simply to "accumulate knowledge" on this subject.

Now, since Mr. Dmitrichev's trip to Washington struck me as a typically worthless junket and waste of the American taxpayer's money (we pay 25 percent of the cost of the U.N.), I called his immediate superior at the U.N., Ben Sanders, who is from the Netherlands and is director of the Information and Studies Branch of the Disarmament Affairs Department of the Office of the U.N. Secretariat.

And what I wanted to know was this: Why was it necessary for Mr. Dmitrichev to fly to Washington, stay overnight and personally attend this symposium (about which he was writing no report), when he could have ordered, by mail, copies of the tapes of this conference and copies of the papers presented?

Well, Mr. Sanders is not very happy with my question, to put it mildly. Explaining that Mr. Dmitrichev is a senior political officer, an official, a bureaucrat who makes about $55,000 a year, he is flustered when I ask: Just exactly what is Mr. Dmitrichev's job? Says Mr. Sanders: "I can't give you a job description. He attends meetings, writes reports, he — well, what does an official do?"

When Mr. Sanders starts to tell me how the U.N. General Assembly has ordered a study of nuclear war, I cut him off saying that I know, Mr. Dmitrichev has already told me this. I reiterate my question about why couldn't Mr. Dmitrichev have simply ordered, by mail, copies of the tapes of the speeches and papers delivered at this symposium?

Mr. Sanders: "Are you questioning our procedure?"

Me: "Yes, definitely!"

Then, his voice getting louder and sounding like a bellicose recorded Amtrak scheduling announcement, Mr. Sanders repeats that the U.N. General Assembly has asked for a report on nuclear war.

Me: "But why couldn't Mr. Dmitrichev order the symposium tapes and papers by mail?"

Mr. Sanders: (really yelling now) "What the hell are you —!"

Me: (Also yelling) "Look, my country pays 25 percent of your salary and Mr. Dmitrichev's, so don't yell at me, please!"

Saying that I have "a cheek" telling him how to run *his* (sic) business, Mr. Sanders questions whether ordering the tapes and papers by mail would have been cheaper, noting that at the U.N. — as in any bureaucracy — the "absolute minimum cost" of writing a letter is $10 for each letter. And yes, it's true, he says, that Mr. Dmitrichev did not write a report about the symposium but had to be at the meeting "to know where to go for various bits of documentation" and to show that the U.N. had an interest in this meeting.

When I ask: But why send a Soviet down here to cover this meeting? Mr. Sanders asks: Why not? He says they have many groups dealing with this subject and it was Mr. Dmitrichev's turn to go. And yes, he says, he thinks Mr. Dmitrichev will give an honest report, but only orally.

When I tell Mr. Sanders he hasn't made a very convincing case for Mr. Dmitrichev's having to physically attend this symposium, he exclaims: "I don't have to make a case!. I don't have to defend myself!" When I remind him that he really does because I and other American taxpayers pay a portion of his salary and Mr. Dmitrichev's, he asks: "But what about the Dutch and Japanese taxpayers?"

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